

Historical Note on the Gakkhar Chief Sultan Sarang Khan

Sultan Sarang Khan's fidelity and sacrifice has attained a legendary status in the history of the subcontinent. As the original folk hero of Pothohar, he is celebrated for the strength of his character as he refused to switch allegiance while facing great adversity and suffering immense personal loss. Sarang Khan is the epitome of martial character that values integrity and loyalty as the foremost traits in an individual, and his legend edifies the martial tradition of Pothohar.

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Very little information about the early life of Sultan Sarang Khan is available in contemporary sources and what we do know is based solely on the description of Kaigoharnama [1, 2]. It was the conflict with the Sur dynasty and Sultan Sarang's refusal to submit to the authority of the new emperor Sher Shah Suri (1486-1545) that brought him to the notice of the early chroniclers. The magnitude and political impact of this prolonged conflict was substantial and dominated the account of Gakkhars in general and Sultan Sarang Khan in particular in the works of nearly all contemporary and even many later day historians.

Sultan Sarang Khan became the chief of Gakkhars of Pothohar only when his cousin Sultan Hathi Khan died in a palace intrigue (he was poisoned by his wife) [1, 2]. Sultan Hathi Khan had earlier slain Sarang Khan's father in a surprise assault on Pharwala and became the undisputed master of the Gakkhar territory. Sarang Khan's father Tatar Khan was a rival Gakkhar chieftain who had unsuccessfully attempted to blockade his troublesome nephew Hathi Khan probably at the behest of Daulat Khan, the Lodhi governor of Lahore [3]. In fact, with no local ruler potent enough to challenge his authority, Hathi Khan became so fiercely independent that in 1519 the first Mughal emperor Babur (1483-1530), leading his troops in person, had to mount an expedition on the Pharwala fort to subdue him. As a direct outcome of this attack, Hathi Khan was overpowered and submitted, and was later confirmed in his possessions by the emperor [3]. In a fateful twist of events, Sultan Hathi Khan on his death bed transferred the right of ownership of the Gakkhar country to Sultan Sarang, evidently considering him more capable and deserving than his own sons. Babur on a subsequent expedition to India invited Sultan Sarang Khan to submit, won over the young Gakkhar chief, and forged an unparalleled bond of loyalty between Gakkhars and the Mughal dynasty.

With the rise of the Mughal power in India, and during the brief reign of Babur and the first part of the reign of emperor Humayun (1508-1556), Sultan Sarang Khan ruled his territory as a quasi-independent chief. As steadfast and reliable allies, the few things Mughal emperors demanded from Gakkhars in return for the semi-independent nature of their territorial possessions were their fidelity and military service, and a caparisoned horse as yearly tribute

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The Mughal emperor Humayun was engaged in bitter power struggles with the rulers of many autonomous or semi-autonomous territories within his empire during the first part of his reign. Among his opponents, Farid al-Din Khan, the ruler of Bihar, who would later rule India as Sher Shah Suri, emerged as the most enterprising and as the most successful one. In 1540, after losing the Battle of Kannauj, Humayun was unable to resist Sher Shah Suri anymore and retreated towards Lahore. Pursued by the soon to be new emperor, Humayun and his brothers were no longer able to hold their ground anywhere in India and sought refuge in the present

day territory of Afghanistan. Kamran Mirza, Humayun's half brother who ruled Kabul ultimately forced him to seek shelter with Tahmasp I (1514-1576), the Shah of Iran.

In order to consolidate his control of the Punjab, Sher Shah Suri demanded submission from local rulers and many complied. However, his demand for submission was soundly rebuffed by Sultan Sarang Khan. Sher Shah Suri was in Bhera when he summoned Sultan Sarang but he only received a disdainful response from the Gakkhar chief [6]. Sultan Sarang Khan sent him a peshkesh of a few quivers of arrows and two maces (or several sheaves of arrows and two tiger cubs, a lion's skin and spears/arrows, or a few hemp blankets and millet, depending upon who you are reading) [7-9]. The variety of items in the Sultan's peshkesh as reported by various historians is rather amusing but the message of defiance was loud and clear, and Sher Shah Suri understood it well. As the foremost ally of the house of Babur in India, Sultan Sarang Khan was alarmed to see the Mughal dynasty crumbling in such a manner and being unable to be of any service. It is likely that he assisted emperor Humayun's half brothers Kamran Mirza and Askari Mirza on their escape from the Punjab to Kabul by confronting their pursuers (a detachment of Sher Shah Suri's army) and helping the royal princes to cross the river Indus [1, 2, 8].

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Sher Shah Suri had no choice but to compel Gakkhars into subjugation by force of arms as the strategic importance of the territory under their control was immense. The Gakkhar country was a spring-board to three regions i.e. Punjab, Kashmir, and Kabul, and two of these regions (Kashmir and Kabul) were under the control or influence of the scions of the Mughal dynasty. If subdued, the territory of Gakkhars might have served as a buffer against any future adventure of the expelled emperor from the north-west [10, 8, 11].

Sher Shah Suri launched a military expedition against Gakkhars, advancing as far as Hathia (Sohawa) and ravaged their territory [6]. During this expedition, his army faced stiff resistance and many captives were taken on both sides. One of the captives taken by the attacking army was a daughter of Sultan Sarang Khan. Following the laws and usages of war of the period, Sher Shah Suri bestowed her on Khawas Khan, one of his most trusted military commanders [10]. On the advice of his aides who were familiar with the rugged terrain of the Gakkhar territory and the difficulty it offered to the invader, he decided to build a fort that could house a large garrison as an immediate measure to check the power of Gakkhars, and in the long run be able to thwart any attempt of the Mughals to launch a military expedition into India. The site of the fort was reconnoitered by Sher Shah Suri himself and it was named as Rohtas. He left Punjab in 1541 entrusting the campaign against Gakkhars to his military commanders [8].

The construction of Rohtas fort and the threat posed by its large garrison prompted Sultan Sarang Khan to take defensive measures. He was staying at the village Sultanpur (Dina) at that

time, which was located on the right bank of the river Jhelum not very far from the site chosen for erecting the fort. Sultanpur (now inundated due to construction of Mangla dam) was a strategic location protected on three sides by the river and being an old settlement of Gakkhars, formed the southern boundary of the parganah of Dangali. He fortified Sultanpur by setting up a defensive wall that extended for approximately 05 miles from the south-east of the village to its north-west. The remains of the fortification and other structures (a section of the wall measuring nearly 2200 ft., a gateway, a mosque in ruins, and pucca graves) were visible as late as 1956 [12, 2]. The photograph labeled 2 below shows the remains of the surviving gateway of the fortification in a dilapidated state. A reference for this photograph is not available as I have not been able to locate the book in which it was published.

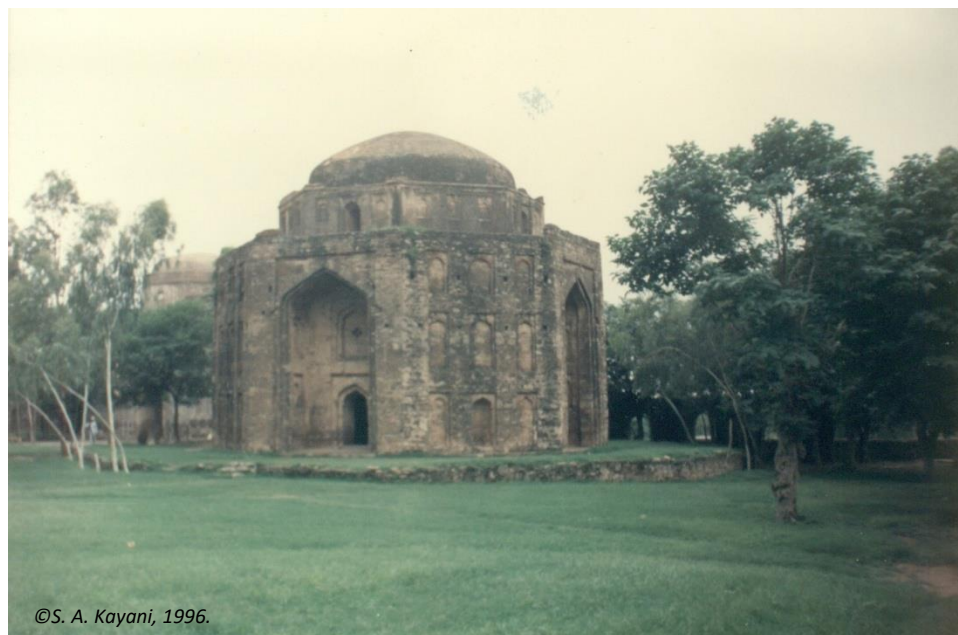
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When Sher Shah Suri died in 1545, his son Islam Shah Suri (1507-1554) ascended the throne and continued his father's policy of subjugation of Gakkhar territory through active military operations. During this period, Haibat Khan Niazi (also known as Azam Humayun), a disaffected noble of Sher Shah Suri, who was at war with the new emperor sought refuge with the Gakkhars [13, 14, 8]. Incidentally, Haibat Khan Niazi was one of those military commanders who were appointed by Sher Shah Suri to subdue Gakkhars before proceeding to Bengal in 1541 [8]. Islam Shah with the intention to pacify Punjab, marched against the Gakkhars in person with a

large army in 1548 and encamped at Rohtas fort that was still under construction [7]. With overwhelming support of men and material, and superior tactics, the emperor was able to defeat and capture Sultan Sarang Khan along with many of his family members. As a rebel chief at war with the highest authority in India, Sultan Sarang Khan was flayed alive and his skin displayed as war trophy on one of the gates of the Rohtas fort [15, 13, 9, 1, 2]. His son Kamal Khan, who was an active participant in his father's affairs, was taken hostage and imprisoned in the Gwalior fort [15]. Many other members of Sultan Sarang Khan's family met similar fates and suffered profoundly. It is likely that male members of the family were put to death while women and children were enslaved. The misery and dispersal of the family continued for years and the progeny of Sultan Sarang Khan saw many ups and downs. A remarkable episode of this tragedy was narrated by the saint Shah Daula (1581-1676) who resided in Gujrat, to an individual named Izzat Khan, son of Sultan Shadman Khan, the Gakkhar chief of Pharwala. According to Shah Daula, he was born to a woman named Niamat Khatun, who was a maternal grandchild of Ghazi Khan, a son of Sultan Sarang Khan. Niamat Khatun's mother was one of the ladies who were made captive after the demise of Sultan Sarang Khan and taken to Delhi [16, 17]. For a description of the life and times of Sultan Shadman Khan, the reader is referred to 'Historical Note on Sultan Shadman Khan, a Mughal Era Poet', ver. 1.2, dated 11th May, 2024.

Sultan Sarang Khan's death was a severe blow to Gakkhar resistance. His younger brother Sultan Adam Khan, who assumed the leadership of the tribe after his brother's demise, prolonged the fight as best as he could and a stalemate ensued. He decided to enter into negotiations with the leaders of the invading army to avoid further death and destruction. An uneasy peace was achieved on the condition that all rebel fugitives including Haibat Khan Niazi will be expelled from Pothohar. The terms were agreed to by Sultan Adam Khan and Haibat Khan and his followers were advised to leave [7, 14]. Haibat Khan Niazi proceeded to Kashmir, wandering from one place to another in search of protection. He was relentlessly pursued by Islam Shah Suri and ultimately lost the struggle when he and his family and a number of his followers were killed by Mirza Haidar Dughlat, the ruler of Kashmir [14]. Mirza Haidar did not want an unnecessary confrontation with Islam Shah Suri by abetting a rebel who was at the bitter end of the emperor's wrath. Sultan Adam Khan is rightly credited with handling this critical situation in a tactful manner and was able to maintain his hard-earned peace by achieving a balance of power. Gakkhars recovered from their losses and regained their power and autonomy without ever relinquishing control of their territory to Islam Shah Suri. Sultan Adam Khan honored his late brother's memory by upholding the oath of loyalty to the house of Babur while facing immense military and diplomatic pressure from the functionaries of the Sur empire.

The remains of Sultan Sarang Khan and other members of his family were recovered by Sultan Adam and interred in the caravanserai at Rawat, now popularly known as the Rawat fort [1, 2]. Rawat is a disambiguation of the word rabat, which is a caravanserai that serves a military purpose as well usually at the frontier of a kingdom or state. The name, style of architecture, and intended purpose of the caravanserai at Rawat displays a Central Asian influence. The caravanserai was constructed on the southern boundary of Gakkhar territory by Sultan Sarang Khan at the site of an abandoned village, which may have been a halting point for troops and ordinary travelers from the days of the Delhi sultanate and even earlier [18]. As fate would have it, the caravanserai became his final resting place as well. A tomb was built on top of the graves of Sultan Sarang Khan and his two wives at a later date probably during the period when his son Sultan Kamal Khan achieved ascendancy and replaced his uncle Sultan Adam Khan as the sole ruler of Pothohar [19]. The photograph labeled 3 below shows the tomb of Sultan Sarang Khan as it appeared before conservation. The tomb has remained in a fairly good state of preservation throughout but like all other Muslim era monuments, it was re-appropriated for administrative purposes during the Sikh rule. As a consequence, the grave markers were lost and the tomb only survived as a large empty hall.



In 2020, the tomb of Sultan Sarang Khan was excavated by the Department of Archeology and Museums, Islamabad as part of a project aimed at renovating and preserving Rawat fort [20]. The archeological study revealed the presence of a large main grave in the center of the tomb identified as that of Sultan Sarang Khan along with four other graves. All five graves have been built using limestone blocks and despite the ill treatment the grave markers received, the actual

graves appear to be undisturbed. The four other graves surrounding the main grave have been found to be covered with massive stone slabs of various sizes. A considerable quantity of archeological artifacts have been recovered from the tomb as well including fragments of human bones, pottery shards, part of a horse bridle, two horse shoes, part of a door hinge, and a single arrow head [21]. The archeological work carried out at the Rawat fort has added credence to the account of Sultan Sarang Khan and at the same time helped to preserve his legacy.

While alive Sultan Sarang Khan personified a true freedom fighter and in death he became larger than life. His legend is an epic tale of loyalty, trial, and ultimate sacrifice. It transcends the bounds of clan and culture, and Pothohar, the land Sarang Khan died protecting is proud of her most valiant son.

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